Families at risk

Why is it certain families in difficult circumstances are able to cope, while others in the same plight simply break down? What makes such families stronger? Can their strength be passed on to other "families at risk"? In today's world, many families face daunting challenges that threaten their ability to function and, indeed, to survive.

The concept of families at risk derives from the observation that families which are not able to cope with problems in one area often demonstrate a similar inability in other areas, and thus are at risk of breakdown. On the other hand, families which are capable of coping with difficult situations demonstrate certain common traits which seem crucial to success in overcoming obstacles.

Families all over the world are indeed under sustained and heavy stress. Disease, war, poverty, famine, environmental problems and other forces are taxing them, often beyond their ability to cope. These pressures are clearly not confined to the developing world: witness the impact on families, in developing and developed countries alike, of unemployment, drugs, crime and the scourge of AIDS.

To address the problem, the United Nations system has proposed a working definition of "families at risk" as families which are unable to fulfil the basic functions of production, reproduction and socialization. These families do not meet their members' basic needs in areas such as health, nutrition, shelter, physical and emotional care and personal development.

It is also possible to consider at risk those families in which individuals lose the sense of personal and group security; families in which individual members experience physical or psychological exploitation or injustice in the distribution of rights and responsibilities; and families which are likely to break up as a consequence of political, social or economic factors.

Some risk factors arise within the family. These include domestic violence, drug and alcohol addiction, child and sexual abuse and child neglect. When such pathology becomes apparent, public or voluntary institutions may play a vital role by taking responsibility for the family's nurturing and caring functions.

Large numbers of families are at risk due to forces beyond their control. Refugee and displaced families, immigrant families, single-parent families, and those whose livelihood has been destroyed by environmental degradation are but a few examples. In these circumstances, it is necessary to identify the characteristics of families that are able to provide for their basic needs. Once identified, those characteristics can be strengthened in other families.

Refugee families face special problems. In the sudden move from home to country of asylum, husbands and wives may be separated, and children may be forced to leave their relatives. Feelings of helplessness and insecurity in an unfamiliar setting, sickness and malnutrition exert tremendous strains on those families who do survive.

But even in extreme circumstances, the family remains an irreplaceable source of strength. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has found that the most effective relief measures are those which recognize the value of the family; accordingly, that agency has developed an approach which utilizes the refugee family's resources and capacity to organize itself. The refugee family is seen as a potential unit for self-help, whose strengths must be put to full use.

Single parenthood is also an important issue. Children in families headed by single mothers are significantly more likely to live in poverty than children living with both parents. In the United States, 65 per cent of children of black single mothers are poor, compared with only 18 per cent of children of black married couples. Single-parent families where the mother is a teenager present the greatest problem, due to the general inadequacy of financial resources and lack of parental experience.

Some of the factors putting families at risk can be predicted and prevented. The prevalence of vulnerable families in the population is rarely measured: little is known about families of this type until the problems begin to manifest themselves. If left undiagnosed and untreated, vulnerable families would soon add to the burden of suffering and cost on the community. If, following early diagnosis, effective treatment prevented further breakdown, the benefit could be considerable.

Effective prevention is preferable to the more costly and less effective therapeutic approaches. "First aid" measures involve special housing, money grants and the re-equipping and stabilizing of rehoused families. When domestic violence threatens a family, or couple, immediate protection is offered by programmes such as shelters, women's and children's legal centres, telephone hot lines and therapy programmes. Long-term measures include better education and public information campaigns, as well as improvement of the status of women.

To address these problems, the United Nations system, under the auspices of the Ad Hoc Interagency Meetings on the International Year of the Family, has established a system-wide Task Force on Families at Risk to develop joint activities benefiting families endangered by vulnerability or breakdown.

The Task Force is led by the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), with the organizational support of the Secretariat for the International Year of the Family. The Task Force's first meeting was hosted by WHO in Geneva in July 1993.

The aim is to pool United Nations expertise to identify factors placing families at risk, as well as factors that enable families to cope with problems; identify tools for developing activities directed at families at risk; and promote interventions enhancing family well-being. This is one of several joint efforts being carried out by organizations and agencies of the United Nations system for the International Year of the Family.

Published by the United Nations Department of Public Information
DPI/1417–93757–November 1993–8M

♻ Printed on recycled paper